

LXII. Resnick & Malzberg

Talk Radio Redux

BY MIKE RESNICK &
BARRY N. MALZBERG

Mike

I'm going to recite a little history, right up to the present. Bear with me. There's a reason for it.

In my starving-writer days, back in the 1960s and early 1970s, I wrote a couple of hundred novels in what we euphemistically call the "adult field." A lot of us did. You, me, Robert Silverberg, Donald E. Westlake, Lawrence Block, even Marion Zimmer Bradley (a woman). No one ever said we couldn't, no one ever tried to stop or censor us.



I supplemented that income by editing a quartet of tabloids, like *The National Inquirer*—only worse. Never got busted, never got censored, never got castigated. Ditto with a trio of men's magazines I edited.

I've written almost nothing except science fiction (and a few mysteries) for the past third of a century. Included were the "Tales of the Velvet Comet," a four-book series set aboard an orbiting brothel. Sold it to a lady editor. Never heard a peep of protest from anyone.

Along the way I wrote *The Branch*, a rather blasphemous novel about the true Jewish Messiah who shows up

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—Mike

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about 50 years from now, which perforce had to prove that Jesus was a fraud. No one objected. I even sent copies to Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart in the hope that one of them might hold the book up to a TV camera and promise that anyone reading it would be corrupted beyond redemption, thus guaranteeing that it would become a bestseller. Apparently neither of them were offended enough even to protest on their radio shows.

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So it's understandable that I thought the days of censorship were long gone.

Turns out I was wrong.

Take a look at the cover to a recent issue of *The SWFA Bulletin*, issue number 200. There's a warrior woman on it. Not a hell of a lot different from a few hundred warrior women who have graced the covers of our field's books and magazines ever since C. L. Moore (a woman) created Jirel of Joiry. I think the warrior woman is wearing boots, but it's pretty dark and shaded in that area, I know she displaying less flesh than just about any bikini you can see on any beach in the country today.

So what's unusual about this particular warrior woman?

Simply this: A group of younger writers and fans objects to her presence on the cover of the *Bulletin*, and they're making quite a bit of noise about it.

President John Scalzi has taken the blame for it, which is very generous of him, and as long as he's being so accommodating I think I'll blame him for the economy and maybe the problems in Afghanistan too—but there's no "blame" associated with the very typical cover, and President Scalzi to the contrary, it was our editor, Jean Rabe (a woman) whose decision it was to run it.

It was also Ms. Rabe's request that you and I do a couple of Dialogues (issues #199 and #200) on the history of women in the field. We addressed lady writers in the earlier issue, and lady editors and publishers in the later one. And we seem to have offended some members every bit as much as the cover art did.

How?

By having the temerity to mention that Bea Mahaffey, who edited *Other Worlds* in the very early 1950s, was beautiful. (Which, according to every man and woman who knew her then, is absolutely true.) After all, we're talking about an editor, not a pin-up model, so how dare we mention her looks? What business does that have here? For example, no one ever mentions JFK's looks, do they?

I'm told they also object to an incident I related, to the effect that the CFG (Cincinnati Fantasy Group) was composed

entirely of men until Bea joined and the men's wives got a look at her, and then they all joined too. This story was told me by still-active 92-year-old Margaret Keiffer, widow of superfan Don Ford and also of SF collector Ben Keiffer. Margaret was one of the ladies who joined for that reason. To this day she has no interest in science fiction, but she loves the social life afforded her by fandom and is the only person to have attended all 63 Midwestcons. She told me that story about Bea—who became as popular with the local women as with the local men—because she thought it was an amusing incident, and because it shaped the last six decades of her life.

So, Barry, just off the top of your head, what's your opinion of, not a religion, but a writers' organization that will let me say "fuck" in these pages (see? I said it and I'm still standing) but has some members that want to censor the word "beautiful" and the thousandth painting of an absolutely generic warrior woman?

Barry

The question is whether those who object to Warrior Woman or "beautiful" adjectivally applied to a woman are merely displeased or whether they want repetition censored. That isn't clear to me and your description of these events leads me to infer that it isn't clear to you either. Do they differ



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— Barry

with that *Bulletin* cover and the adjective and leave it there? Or do they want to ban further such covers or adjectival description?

I don't like the objections myself, and I find them offensive. Then again, First Amendment near-absolutist that I am (I will explain the "near" some other time) I feel that they have every right to complain loudly and often about those two examples... just as you and I have the right to complain loudly and often about what I take to be (dare I use the word) their stupidity. "The proper response to offensive speech is more speech" the cliché goes, and as long as we are able to write freely (and Jean is permitted a cover of her choice, she is after all the *Bulletin* editor) I have no problem with the alarums issuing somewhat anonymously from objectors to the issue. But then again, if they want to shut us down... no more Woman Warriors and no offensive description of a beautiful woman as beautiful, well then there is a problem. Clarify, clarify. If I can continue using the word "beautiful" and the word's opponents respond in anger, we have a situation, an impasse as it were with which both sides can live and I would be content if not overjoyed to leave the issue there.

What is somewhat disturbing, of course, is the anonymity (at least to me) of the complainers and the fact that it is a writers' organization which has become the arena for difference. What business is it of the Science Fiction Writers of America to embark upon a course of suppression? But then again, I don't know if we are dealing with calls for suppression or simply a scattering of members who did not like the *Bulletin* cover and our column and objected to the apparent sexism? I can certainly accept the latter. I cannot accept the former, but at least to my knowledge that is not at this time part of the complainers' agenda.

So, as I wrote: clarify for me if you will. And on the subject of suppression or its opposite, I'll have some remi-

niscences of my relationship with the maligned Roger Elwood, now obscure to most of the membership, but two fighting words 35 years ago.

Mike

I'd be more than happy to clarify, but none of them have had the guts to approach or write me directly. I have a number of friends in and out of SFWA who report all these goings-on to me, and are happy to name names, but since it's second-hand information I choose not to repeat the names here.

I *do* know that a number of them complained to John Scalzi at ConFusion, and I *do* know that a number objected to the cover, both to John and to Ms. Rabe, because they told me so.

So I thought I'd see just how widespread this lack of consideration (or is it morality) has extended throughout American letters—which is to say, I went to the local Barnes & Noble superstore and began studying cover art.

And a *lot* of it abounded in bare, raw, pulsating flesh, totally naked from the neck to the navel. No question about it. It's there for anyone to see—and of course, since such displays seem to offend some of our members, to picket.

You know where I found it?

In the romance section. I'd say that just about every other cover shows a man's bare torso, lean and muscular, usually with a few more abs than Nature tends to provide. The man's head is rarely portrayed. Clearly these are erotic covers, designed to get a certain readership's pulse pounding.

As far as I know, no one's tried to censor the publishers, get the art directors fired, or shut them down. Not even our moral SFWA crusaders.

Well, of course (I hear you say), these are romances, designed for a specific audience, and they have nothing to do with science fiction.

Okay, you have a point.

But it falls apart when you consider just how many muscular near-naked

Conan types have graced our covers over the years with nary a voice raised in protest.

Let's try a little thought experiment. Alan Dean Foster works out every day, lifts weights, runs, and has never had a time when he didn't look like the epitome of fitness. Robert Silverberg has a knack of making suits look better on him than on anyone else. Yet somehow I doubt that if I mention in one of these Dialogues that they're a pair of fine-looking men there's going to be an outraged uproar because I very generally described their looks rather than their writing.

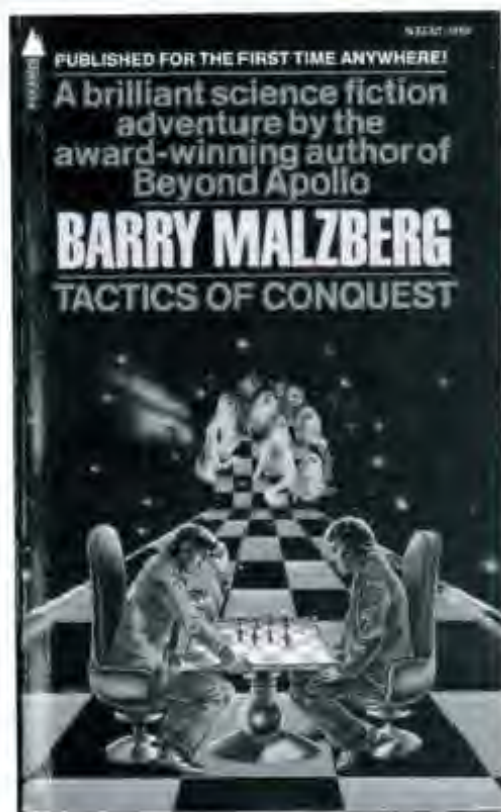
Well, we could go on about this particular incidence of intolerance and would-be censorship all day. But one of the reasons it's worth mentioning at all is because despite the fact that it has left me alone to write what I please, this field has a history of trying to silence voices it didn't like—including not only Elwood's, but also, as I recall, yours.

Have you got any particular memories (or lessons) that you'd care to share?

Barry

I've had my trouble and conflicts over the 46 years through which I have been publishing. It is impossible to run 12 million words in public blamelessly, or in utter tranquility. I have only been directly censored once, however. An editor at Avon cut the last paragraph of the Afterword to the novel *Revelations* ("you are critical of the editor of the previous edition and I am an editor and will not publish negative appraisal of a colleague.") It isn't censorship which does most of us in, but *self-censorship*. We are bright enough in the main to know what might be troublesome or income-depriving, and we consequently do not write that. "The most vicious or virulent censor lives in the writer's head," I pointed out on a panel long ago.

I've been the subject of animadversion. My favorite example, which is



of course synchronously my least favorite example—would be the late Ted Pauls in the *Journal of the Washington Science Fiction Association* in 1971. Reviewing my fan/recurse novel *Dwellers of the Deep* (Ace, 1970) [as K.M. O'Donnell – ed.] Pauls expressed his loathing for my fan portraits and depiction of club meetings. “Malzberg should be killed (*italics mine*) for writing this,” he concluded.

Well, as Marat said in his bath, *there is a critic*. Was Pauls writing only metaphorically? I never asked him, and now he is long dead. Anatole Broyard, talking of a story about a “castrating woman” in a creative writing class long ago said, “Now let us be clear that there is a difference between a figure of speech and an actual event.” I’ll give Pauls by proxy a pass on this, and also the letter-writer in *Fantastic* who wrote: “I know this is kind of unfair, but I must say that I have seen photographs of Malzberg and he looks exactly like you would think the author of ‘The Man Who Married A Beagle’ could be expected to look.”

Animadversion of course is not censorship. Censorship is altogether a far uglier and more dangerous beast. And the problem with many of those who think of themselves as “liberals” is that they are against all forms of censorship, except in cases where they disapprove of the expression or photographs. Rudy Giuliani, Mayor of New York City in the 90s, wanted to have Serrano’s exhibit “Piss Christ” removed from the Brooklyn Museum exhibit... but Andrea Dworkin, that most radical-liberal of feminists, wanted *all* pornography banned. How did she define “pornography?” As any description of heterosexual intercourse, which she wrote was inseparable from rape.

Our Warrior Woman protestors and enemies of the adjective (who unlike Ms. Dworkin will not identify themselves) fall into the category of what Right Wing radio talkers call “liberal fascists,” and I cannot disagree with that description. I have put in unfortunate, maybe even indefensible time, listening to those radio talkers, and I agree wholly with at least one of them, Sean Hannity. He says: “The difference between the so-called liberals and conservatives is that the liberals want to shut us down. They truly do not believe that we should have airtime. They truly believe that we should be banned. We do not feel that way about them. We don’t like their positions but we acknowledge their right to expression. They do not extend us the same courtesy.”

This seems to be the subterranean issue here... the conviction held by at least some of the protestors that what they found offensive should be banned. That does not take us to anyplace that a writers’ organization should want to go, and I find the central issue here as distressing as you do.

Roger Elwood, an anthology editor who whizzed through the field in the mid-seventies and was gone by the end of the decade, was an evangelical Christian who took his faith seriously and was made very uncomfortable by graphic sexual description or the employment of Naughty Words in dialogue. He didn’t like atheism much either, and science fiction has, as we know, a lot of card-carrying atheists. But whatever Elwood’s suppression of other writers, I can verify only my own experience—and through his offices I placed five novels, all of which contained wall-to-wall depictions and dialogue which represented everything he was said to hate. And he never asked me to alter a scene or cut a word. Surely the premise of *Tactics of Conquest* (chess masters who are playing for the fate of the galaxy and have a not-so-subterranean homosexual attraction) might have nauseated him. Surely Lena’s sexual fantasizing in *Galaxies* made him gulp, and surely the demented eponymous Scop killing Kennedys

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for fun and coded sexual release offended him (he told me so). But the novels went through and found their fate without any attempt at suppression. Can we ask no less of the Science Fiction Writers of America liberal fascists?

Mike

You know, the fact that—as I mentioned in the opening—no one in science fiction has successfully censored me in the name of Political Ineptitude doesn't mean that it hasn't been suggested at lower levels.

Today, for better or worse, the Kirinyaga stories are accepted as moral fables... but things were a little different when they were coming out. To wit, this letter from Charles Platt, author of *Garbage World* and editor/publisher of the very controversial *Patchin Review*:

"Personally, I think it is an outrage that science fiction, which has the potential to do great good by stimulating the imagination and encouraging a problem-solving attitude toward the future, is used in such a way that it may encourage the reverse: hobbling the imagination and turning away from problems that seem too difficult to face. This is the mood of the times, among many people scared of technology, and *your stories are encouraging it* [italics his]."

Translation: how dare I write stories that disagree with his notion of what science fiction is all about?

The New York Review of Science Fiction took some potshots at me because,

to quote them, "Is Resnick's space-bottled African culture ever sexist?"

First, it's not Resnick's space-bottled African culture. It's the culture of the Kikuyu tribe, and indeed about 97% of the tribes in Africa. It wasn't what I invented; it's what I observed on numerous trips to East Africa.

But forget all that. Assume I made up the sexist culture from scratch. Am I never to write about such a made-up culture because it offends a particular female writer who contributes an article to a semi-prozine?

Forget the fact that most Kikuyu feel their lives were infinitely better before the advent of the Europeans. Pretend I fabricated it. Am I never to write such a story because it disagrees with someone else's notion of what science fiction should be?

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I recall numerous instances of censorship and attempted censorship in what we fondly tell ourselves is this most liberal and tolerant of fields.

You think not?

How many stories did Kay Tarrani (not necessarily John Campbell) reject at *Astounding* because they contained even minimum sexual innuendo? How many articles have been written about how truly creative writers got past this censorship? "A ball-bearing mousetrap" as a synonym for "cat" is perhaps the most famous.

Something more serious? One of the most important breakthroughs in science fiction's history was the publication of Philip Jose Farmer's "The Lovers." Prior to its appearance, an alien reading science fiction would know everything about human beings except that they come equipped with genitals and an urge to use them.

And the question, of course, is: how many of the top prozines rejected "The Lovers" solely for that reason before it finally found a home in the less-than-stellar *Startling Stories*?

Usually this kind of intimidation doesn't work. Usually you can look some of these talk-show liberals, as you properly

define them, in the eye and say: "Buzz off! If you don't like it, don't read it."

But every once in a while, it's not a bad idea to hold their notions of fair play and a free press up to the light, and say, as we're saying now: "Here, SFWA members: Do you really want these guys arbitrarily deciding what you can and can't look at and read?"

Barry

That is a nice rousing concluding paragraph, putting the issue to the membership. That is where the issue belongs of course. Who should women want making decisions on what they are allowed to read... Andrea Dworkin? Do you want the State or Federal Government (or the Supreme Court) telling you what you are allowed in your bedroom and with whom? Or, thank you very much, would you like that decision to be yours and those with whom you might share that bedroom?

The problem, however, is that in the world of the talk show liberals and conservatives, you are not allowed to make that decision. That decision will be made for you by those who are better informed, more intelligent, and operat-





ing in your best interest (which they perceive far better than you). In the pre-Lady Chatterley decision days, that decision had been made in your interest long before your opportunity to make that decision yourself. And the Supreme Court with its Dred Scott decision years before the Civil War had decided that the Civil War would not be necessary.

That is the mind of the censor, you understand. It was the collective mind of the Hayes Board for film before the courts finally in the 1960s sanctioned the studios breaking that code. It still remains the mind of the ratings board which deems some films suitable for accompanied adolescents, others available for unaccompanied adolescents. They decide, you attend. Or not, if they forbid you.

But won't the censors themselves be corrupted by exposure to some of those nasty films or books? If it is the role of the censors to protect the public from corruption, who will protect the censors? Of course, all of this proceeds from their assumption that they can protect themselves from corruption by having a higher degree of perception and morality. But the clods on whose behalf they function do not have sensibilities sufficiently refined or resistant.

You can see where this line of reasoning gets us: This way to the abattoir, ladies and gents, please stay in line and be careful at all crossings—and it

is no place that any writers' organization should collectively be, nor any of its members. If our galaxy-spanning sensibilities cannot handle the woman warrior or the description of someone as "beautiful," then how can they deal with the singularity?

Donald A. Wollheim bitterly observed to me in 1968 that the electorate of the USA had never in the 22 years since its institution been given any chance to vote on the "Cold War"; the Iron Curtain and its implications had been imposed upon the populace dictatorially.

The liberal fascists are trying to do this to you and your relationship with the First Amendment, and they don't want a vote either. Is that acceptable to the membership and to the larger class of writers with whom we are conjoined?

With that rhetorical flourish I bow and exit running, pursued by a bear.

Mike

Don't scare me like that. I thought you were going to say "naked singularity," and precipitate a write-in campaign.

You know, I think a lot of this *brouhaha* is because we're Old White Guys (though I consider myself to be in a state of Advanced Youth). And you know the feeling of a certain group among the populace, both here and even outside of SFWA.

Old White Guys should only write about what they know, which as far as said group is concerned is Other Old White Guys. I mean, hell, it's been a couple of centuries since either of us looked at a woman with lust in our hearts, and even longer since we did something about it. We can't have any black friends, because our generation was composed exclusively of slave-owners. We can't even spell "homosexual," let alone define it or say it without cringing. Everybody knows that.

Well, maybe not quite everybody. Maybe just our field's equivalent of the radio talk show morons you mentioned.

The next question is: is this an overreaction to attempted censorship? The answer is simple and straightforward: I don't think it's possible to overreact to thought control, whether Politically Inept or Politically Motivated or merely displaying the would-be controller's personal tastes and biases.

Consider: When all is said and done, we didn't run the kind of diatribe that you hear from almost every top-selling rap star these days. We didn't bring Henry Miller up to date. Or Rabelais. All we did was appear in a magazine with a warrior woman on the cover, and mention that a woman who edited a science fiction magazine 65 years ago was beautiful.

If they get away with censoring *that*, can you imagine what comes next? I'm pretty sure Joe Stalin could imagine it. Of course Schicklgruber the painter could imagine it. Even Chairman Mao could imagine it.

But could you? Could you write this kind of seemingly trivial censorship/thought control into a story without having an editor reject it because those days are over and now that we have an enlightened populace they will of course never come again.

Or is this maybe, just maybe, how they *do* come again?



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